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# Susan Atefat-Peckham

## Biography

Susan Atefat-Peckham was born on August 12, 1970 in New York City to Iranian parents. As a child, she lived in France and went to boarding school across the border in Switzerland, where her father worked for the United Nations. During the summer, Atefat-Peckham visited relatives in Tehran, Iran. These visits built a strong foundation for the subject matter of the poetry she wrote as an adult. However, it was not easy being Iranian during her childhood and teenage years. "I grew up through the hostage crisis of the late 1970s, and I was very careful who I told where I was from -- it was a very painful time to be an Iranian-American," she said in an article for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* (Grossmann 1).

Atefat-Peckham attended Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Originally, she majored in biology and chemistry and planned to attend medical school and become a doctor. However, she decided to broaden her horizons by getting a master's degree in English before going on to medical school. She met poet Joel Peckham during her master's degree studies, and he urged her to take her poetry writing more seriously and to consider a career as a poet instead of a doctor. She took his advice and also accepted his proposal of marriage. The two were married in 1994 at the Armstrong Browning Library on the Baylor University campus. They had two sons together, Cyrus and Darius.

In 1999, Atefat-Peckham completed her Ph.D. at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where she taught creative writing, literature, and composition. In 2000, her writing career began to flourish. Her nonfiction manuscript *Black Eyed Bird* was a finalist in the Associated Writing Programs Intro Award, and her poetry manuscript *That Kind of Sleep* was accepted for publication by Coffee House Press, a small, independent publishing company in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

### Quick Facts

- \* 1970-2004
- \* Born in America, and identified as an Iranian-American poet
- \* Wrote *That Kind of Sleep* (2001)

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*That Kind of Sleep* was also selected by renowned writer Victor Hernando Cruz as a 2000 National Poetry Series Competition winner.

Atefat-Peckham's poetry, as well as her choice of subject matter, became even more meaningful to her after the events of September 11. As an Iranian, as well as a native New Yorker, the destruction of the World Trade Center profoundly affected her, as did the subsequent attacks on Afghanistan by U.S. forces. She says, "There is a great deal of grief on the parts of Muslims and Middle Eastern people for the tragedies that [Americans] have endured. Likewise, hearing about our recent bombing of Afghanistan, my feeling is very mixed. When I heard about the attacks [in Afghanistan], my heart sank, in much the same way it did when I heard about the attacks on America" (Ahern 2). In another interview, she added that she feels an obligation to speak out about the attacks, saying that she is "making amends for the years [she] denied [her] heritage by using every venue possible to discuss Islam and what it means to be an American of Middle Eastern descent" (Grossmann 1).

Through her poetry, Atefat-Peckham strove to show the people of America the beautiful side of Middle Eastern and Persian culture despite the misconceptions and blanket judgments about it that are rampant in America's current political climate. For example, Atefat-Peckham says that "in Iran, women can be lawyers, doctors, judges, hold authoritative positions -- not like the Taliban" (Blay 1). She attempted to show this through her poetry and speaking to groups at readings and other events she attended to promote *That Kind of Sleep*. *That Kind of Sleep* takes its title from the words of 13th-century Persian poet Jalaluddin Rumi: "A man goes to sleep in the town where he has always lived, and he dreams he's living in another town / the world is that kind of sleep" (Atefat-Peckham 93). Rumi's poetry also precedes each of the four sections in the book. In a 2001 *Michigan Daily* article, Atefat-Peckham explains why this poet's work is important to her: "I think he [Rumi] holds significance for many Americans. I think Rumi is a connection for many Americans into Middle Eastern tradition. He's a nice bridge between the west and the east" (Blay 1).



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The first section of *That Kind of Sleep* deals with Peckham's memories of childhood and summers in Iran. She uses frequent images of basic elements, such as earth, cloth, and food, as well as powerful word choices to immerse the reader in her memories. The following lines from the first poem in the collection, entitled "Marvari: the Pearl Tree," illustrate the powerful nature imagery:

*Leaning deep into leaves,  
my uncle pinched and turned white berries  
from the pearl tree in hands as old and twisted  
as the branches. He squeezed  
my fingers into his and pushed the silver point  
through each fruit, tugging on the thread  
until my palms were wet with juice.*

(Atefat-Peckham 17)

The poems in the first section also talk about various family members, such as the uncle mentioned in the above passage. The collection's second section looks more closely at Iranian women, both past and modern. However, these poems leave the pleasurable memories of childhood and enter into a state of current reality, as they discuss the trials and tribulations of Iranian women, and the actual experience of being a woman in Iran. The poem "Avenue Vali Asr" relates the experience of segregation between men and women on a bus in Tehran:

*Boro Ounja! he said. Over there!  
And I turned to see my place  
among the colored scarves behind. We are not  
sheep, I  
said, We are not  
sheep.*

(Atefat-Peckham 45-46)



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## Biography continued

This poem also contains a reference to Atefat-Peckham's American roots and the freedoms that she wishes Iranian women could share with their American counterparts: "We need another Rosa Parks / to pin herself to that front seat / and say, I am too old for later" (45). The third part of *That Kind of Sleep* portrays old age, illness, and death, but also contains images of new life and birth. In the poem "Nikita's Grave," Atefat-Peckham ruminates upon the death of an older infant sister she never knew:

*"I've been told of my sister buried somewhere in  
upstate New Jersey, eight years older  
than me, named for the daylight crackling of branches  
and rain. There's no point  
in a funeral for an immigrant child just turned  
American.*

(Atefat-Peckham 85)

However, the poem ends with the hope of the approaching spring, a season of rebirth and new life: "I settle along / spaces people weave, petals crotchet black / branches white before they fill with green" (86).

The last section is a longer, more rapidly paced set of sixteen poems in which we are introduced to specific members of a family. Previous themes from the past three sections are covered, and the reader is immersed even more deeply into the life of Iranians. The daily struggles and dangers, the thoughts, hopes, and dreams held by the common people, and the radical differences of Iranians when compared to American life, are all portrayed in this section. Poem fifteen in this cycle, entitled "What Everyone Does," gives the glimpse of a commonplace day in this unknown family's life:



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“ “

*A mother rocks  
her screaming newborn to her breast.  
Naneh Jan stirs. Grandfather lowers  
the steaming cup from his teeth, pulls  
his bed sheets over his shoulders,  
over his ears for quieter dreams.*

(Atefat-Peckham 110)

” ”

Poem seven is a chilling yet lyrical description of a rebellion by Iranian women:

“ “

*They had it planned, waited for the minute  
hand, and black chadors downtown dropped  
down lipstick, hair, bare shoulders, gowns. Hundreds  
unburied, unwrapped, unfolded, uncovered  
until the tanks came pushing through.  
No one said they heard or knew.*

(Atefat-Peckham 101)

” ”

This poem reminds the reader of the prejudice and dangers faced by Iranian women, as well as the bravery of their choice to rebel while knowing the consequences of their actions. The book ends with a starkly beautiful image of a single person disappearing into the night:

“ “

*a small  
light at the end of the street flickers out  
and the alley is black and silent but for  
the clink of his heels, loud with moon-  
light.*

(Atefat-Peckham 111)

” ”



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## Biography continued

This dramatic and simplistic image leaves a lasting impression that remains in the mind of the reader long after the book has been closed.

Before her death, Atefat-Peckham was working on a second poetry collection, tentatively entitled *Silent*, as well as a book of essays and an anthology of Middle Eastern writing. Her work was selected for inclusion in the anthology *In the Field of Words*, published by Prentice-Hall in 2001, and new work appeared in *Borderlands*, *Texas Poetry Review*, *The International Poetry Review*, *International Quarterly*, *The Literary Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *Northwest Review*, *Onthebus*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Puerto Del Sol*, *The Southern Poetry Review*, *The Sycamore Review*, and *The Texas Review*. She taught Creative Writing at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, where, along with her husband, she was co-founding editor of the *Milkwood Review*, an online literary journal. In the fall of 2002, she began a new position at George College and State University where served as Poetry Editor for Arts and Letters, a literary journal, in addition to teaching.

Tragically, on February 7, 2004, Atefat-Peckham and her son Cyrus were killed in a car accident in Amman, Jordan, while she was there on a Fulbright Fellowship.

## Selected Bibliography

### Works by the author

*That Kind of Sleep* (Coffee House Press, 2001)

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